7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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THE KUCCIJA

Among the peculiar customs which still exist in Malta, the *kuccija* may perhaps rank first. 852•

The *kuccija* is an elaborate entertainment given by the parents on the first anniversary of their children's birth.

The company of relations and friends having assembled, the child is brought in and if it be a boy he is presented with a basket or tray containing corn, sweetmeats, coins, an inkstand, a candle, a rosary, a book, a sword, and other toys—if the baby is a girl, needles, silks and ribbands supply the place of the sword and inkstand. 852 787

The choice the baby makes on this occasion will, according to Maltese notions, give a just idea of his future disposition and the profession which he will follow. Should he choose the corn 852 787 828

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852 it is a sign of a liberal character—if he
[787] picks out the inkstand it points towards
[828] inclination for trade or the bar—if he takes the book, the rosary or the candle the assumption is that he intends to dedicate his life to the service of the church.

[574] When the baby makes his or her selection, the guests are treated with refreshments, and they all drink the health and future prospects of the small individual in question.

FUNERALS

764 On the death of a Maltese, two or
767 three women called *Neuuieha*, hired for
[533] the occasion, and attired in long mourning cloaks, immediately entered the house of the deceased singing in a low and dismal voice, some appropriate deathsong. These women cut away

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it the Birthday of the Solar Disc; but Christ is the Sun of Righteousness' " (S. HEATH, *Romance of Symbolism*).[1]

We cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, connect the vampire *Gaugau* with Christianity; but with Mithra the affair becomes quite different. It is not difficult to connect a child born on the eve of the Birth-feast of the bloodthirsty Mithra with something more terrible than "ghostly pranks." It is comforting to hear that the vampire *Gaugau* is now capable of nothing worse than "frightening people with his groanings!"

There was a time before the dread broom of "Progress" began to sweep all peasant customs—good as well as bad—before it, when the newly-delivered mother kept carefully to her house during forty days for fear of meeting another mother who had been confined on the same day. It was believed that of two such women meeting within forty days of their confinement, one would suffer a great misfortune. Two possible reasons for this quaint prohibition are apparent. It was either some remnant of a primitive, levitical period of purification or a means of ensuring that the mother wasted no time gossiping at the doorway or in the market place, to the neglect of her young family.

GROWING UP

With the child's first birthday comes the *'ucc[illegible]* or "choosing." A tray or basket is filled with an assortment of articles representing trades and professions—a book, a rosary, a candle, an inkstand, a sword—whichever the baby first picks up will indicate its bent in life. This simple means of divination is widespread, and little need be said of it except that some grains of corn are sometimes introduced as a symbol of generosity, suggesting that at one time the *'uccija* decided

[1] H. BAYLEY, *The Lost Language of Symbolism.*

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not the trade the child was to follow, but the deity whose particular care the child should be. Corn, sacred to Ceres the Earth-Mother, alone remains.

It will not, unfortunately, be long before the little Maltese makes the acquaintance of the Bogey-man. He is called *Babau*, and differs very little from the English bogey-man. He is black, and lurks in corners, cupboards, behind trees, and in ill-lit streets. Sometimes he will assume the shape of an ox, a ram, or a homely donkey. In Malta he has one virtue. He prefers to haunt those whose possessions have been unfairly come by. If Grez and Zeppu go in fear of *Babau* they have in the *Hares* a friend and protector.

Il Hares—for thus he, or it, is always referred to—takes many forms and performs a variety of tasks. It is possible that *Hares* is the generic name for several spirits, some good, some evil; but the children's *Hares* is our old friend Puck, or Robin Goodfellow. He appears to good children in the form of a little black dwarf, and taking them by the hand leads them off to play with him in some hidden world of his own where fair gardens, luscious sweetmeats, and marvellous toys abound. Only one condition attaches to these secret visits: the *Hares* must never be betrayed to parents or grown-ups. Should his visits be discussed with adults the gates of his magic world are for ever shut upon the garrulous child. I know a grown woman, sensible and devout, who tells of meeting the little black *Hares* frequently when she was a child. She firmly believes in him.

For the adult the *Hares* is a more fearsome creature. Some say that every household has its own particular guardian spirit, sometimes materialized as a black snake. The snake must be treated with respect. If it is injured, calamity will overtake the house and all who dwell in it. This snake would seem to be African in origin. The Bantu races, notably the Zulus, believe that their guardian spirits take upon them the body of a black snake.